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Claude Simon: Writing the Visible

Abstract

Review of *Claude Simon: Writing the Visible*, by Celia Britton

Keywords

Claude Simon: Writing the Visible

Book Reviews

Celia Britton. *Claude Simon: Writing the Visible*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987

Until recently, it has been necessary to justify and defend studying the New Novel. Strategies have included grouping several writers in one critical study¹ and foregrounding theoretical questions.² In either case, New Novel scholars have been caught between the double imperatives of being both introductory and analytic, of providing both a general initiation to the works and a sustained interpretive argument. Claude Simon's 1985 Nobel Prize changed all that. At about the same time, Alain Robbe-Grillet and Marguerite Duras also began to enjoy a new popularity. It can now be assumed that readers will have some familiarity with the considerable corpus of works. In this new phase, a number of critical studies have appeared on individual New Novelists. Celia Britton's *Claude Simon: Writing the Visible* is among the best of these. Her book is written for the specialist: there is no introduction to the novels themselves or to the New Novel generally, and the theoretical framework is complex. But thanks to its clean argumentation and straightforward style, the book will also be accessible to those less familiar with Simon or other contemporary anti-representational writing.

Britton focuses on what she describes as the major contradiction that characterizes Simon's fiction: the "central conflictual relationship between the visual and the textual" (14). Since the visible is present in the novels only through verbal description, this tension takes the form of an unstable mixture of two discourses. Accordingly, Britton explores "how Simon's writing is held in the tension of two contrary movements: a basically representational discourse which attempts to translate sense impressions, especially visual ones, into language, and secondly, working against this, an orientation towards the autonomous generative impulses within language itself" (162). After careful exposition of her methodological tools, Britton uses this central verbal-visual opposition as a lens to examine aspects of Simon's fiction: the multiple subject as it founds but is also constructed in and by representation; descriptions of pictures (photos, paintings, postcards) and the presence of quotations (in foreign languages, from other literary texts, newspaper fragments); motifs like the curtain, the mirror, and language itself as they are fetishized to allow glimpses of the unseen and the unsaid; history and time, not themselves visibly accessible, as they can be contrasted with spatial figures.

Britton lucidly traces the fantasmatic status of these various motifs and figures by identifying an investment of *desire* in Simonian vision and representation: visual description is less *image* than *visual fantasy* or what she calls "mirage." This is the pivot on which turns the complexity of her argument, as it allows articulation of close textual and linguistic readings with a (largely Lacanian) psychoanalytic interpretation of the novels. She analyzes the textual pole of Simonian fictions in terms of the paternal and the Symbolic order, while the visual representational impulse is aligned with the Lacanian Imaginary and the maternal. These categories are prevented from becoming too schematic by careful demonstration of how Simon's oppositions are in fact never stable: maternal and paternal figures overlap and fluctuate, as the symbolic never separates totally from the imaginary, and as the "investment of desire in the visible . . . undercuts the explicit theoretical stance on representation and . . . is, conversely, repressed by the theory" (4).

Her emphasis on the fantasmatic nature of vision distinguishes Britton's book from earlier analyses that followed Roland Barthes in characterizing the New Novel as an "école du regard" typified by its cold-blooded visual description or "chosisme." Britton is indisputably correct to move beyond the earlier purely linguistic interpretations of the New Novel; her comparison of Benveniste and Lacan on subjectivity in language is exemplary. Curiously, however, when she contrasts Simon with other New Novelists, she buys into what she herself calls "the usual stereotype of the nouveau roman." For example, she claims uncritically that Simon's novels "are certainly not the schematic, rationalistic, over-intellectualized productions popularly associated with Robbe-Grillet or Butor" (166). Anyone familiar with Butor's *La Modification* or Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie*, however, will recognize to what extent these stereotypes are as inadequate to an appreciation of those writers as they are to Simon. Thus it is ironic that Britton's study of Simon is invaluable toward understanding the important (though very different) ways in which vision in Butor, Robbe-Grillet, Duras and others is also charged with desire, phobia, and fetishism.

Another point I wish the book had pursued more thoroughly is the specifically *masculine* quality of vision and desire in Simon's fiction. The visual fantasm produced and desired (or produced through desire) is always a woman, and Britton's analysis of fetishistic substitution and its relation to the visual explicitly assumes that it is "male vision" (115) that we are discussing. In her conclusion, Britton attempts to focus squarely on this issue. She states that "Simon's 'ideas' about women are unambiguously reactionary," and then she goes on to explain that this should not be bothersome because these "ideas" are "so transparently determined by a configuration of half-acknowledged fears and desires" that they cannot be considered objective. What is really at issue, she argues quite plausibly, is the construction of

male sexuality (167). This way out of the issue misses two opportunities. First, I am left wondering about Simon's (and not only Simon's) construction of male sexuality as it relates to (or even as it is equivalent to) a process of representing femininity. Secondly, incomplete exploration of this issue prevents the book from being able to address the paradox of *L'Herbe*, the only one of Simon's novels told through a female point of view, as Britton repeatedly notes but never adequately explores. It is, of course, important, as Britton insists, that she is examining not the representation of women, but of fantasies about women. Nevertheless, this is what the gendered nature of representation is all about, and this question could have been addressed within Britton's theoretical framework.

Despite these quibbles, *Simon: Writing the Visible* is a convincing and intelligent book. It makes a major contribution to Simon studies. In addition, Britton's insight into anti-representational strategies illuminates how realism itself works, why it is so strong, why it always returns, and why it is so difficult to subvert.

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NOTES

1. One example is John Sturrock's, *The French New Novel: Claude Simon, Michel Butor, Alain Robbe-Grillet* (Oxford University Press, 1969).
2. For example, while each chapter David Carroll's *The Subject in Question: The Languages of Theory and the Strategies of Fiction* (University of Chicago Press, 1982) is built around a close reading of a single Simon novel, the book is also an investigation of the powers of various critical approaches. Note that Simon's name does not appear in the book's title.